Closing Reflection by the Rev. Thomas Shaw, S.S.J.E.
Meeting of the House of Bishops
Kanuga Conference Center, Hendersonville, North Carolina, March, 1993

Very early on in Christian iconography the Genesis story of the hospitality Abraham offered to the three strangers at the oaks of Mamre became a means of visibly representing the Trinity. The three strangers or angels to whom Abraham offers hospitality become in inconography the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I suppose the most famous icon of this familiar story is Andrei Rublens Holy Trinity, with those three serene figures sitting at table underneath the oak.

But parts of Jewish midrash take a different slant of this Genesis story. In one interpretation of this story Abraham is under his oak tree actually conversing with God and the three strangers are just that, three foreign men. Abraham, instead of continuing his conversation with God, breaks off the conversation with God and turns to offer hospitality to these three men who have wandered into his camp. The midrash is saying through this story that hospitality is more important than our communication with God.

If you have ever been in the deserts of Egypt or Palestine, or any desert for that matter, it's not hard to understand why hospitality was so essential in the life of the ancient nomadic people. Without hospitality, in the scarcity and remoteness of the desert, people would die. For the men of the desert a major portion of every day was given over to hospitality and to the maintenance of relationships within the clan itself, with neighboring clans, and with the stranger. They understood all too clearly that if they were going to win the battle against the elements they had to do it together.

In fact if you visit a bedouin tribe today their tents still reflect the high priority they give to hospitality. In those long, dark, goat hair tents, half the space is for sleeping and the preparation of food and the other half is for the offering of hospitality. Even today a stranger arrives, the mats are spread out on the floor, an fire is started, tea is brewed, food magically appears, and conversation begins.

As you have been meeting this week I have been reflecting on what you have been doing with each other so carefully in your discussions in the small groups, in the private conversations, and the care that you have taken in reporting back to one another and to the planning committee. Like bedouin hospitality, the maintenance of relationships, the communication with one another, is obviously important to you. I think, like ancient nomads, you sense the urgency of hospitality with one another because you know that it could mean the difference between life and death in the real desert of contemporary culture. It takes an inordinate amount of time, as it does for the nomad, it is a sacrificial act on your part, and yet it is critical for salvation.

Something Bishop Browning said the night before last, and then Bishop Hulsey said this evening and Bishop Browning has repeated, struck a chord with me. He said that if the work you have done was to continue with the issues that are before this house then it would most likely be necessary to meet not just in Panama but next spring as well before the General Convention.

And now I gather many of you feel the same. I don't want to be presumptuous, but his statement got me thinking about the men with whom I have shared my life for the past 17 years and where we have come from in our struggle to live out our life with God.

Several years ago we were at a critical stage. We had never taken much time with the maintenance of our relationships except in a kind of informal way of like minds bonding with like minds to persuade the superior of their point of view. We all gathered only once a year for legislative purposes. Because of this there was a legacy in our community of misunderstanding, hurt feelings and active animosity. Somehow, time consuming and expensive as it was, we were led to meeting twice a year for extended periods of time to discuss, to come to know one another, and finally, I think, to love one another.

We close everything down. We move off to a place where there are few distractions. We break into small groups. We even use newsprint. It is by no means a perfect community. We are very fragile. We make tremendous mistakes. But I think we are being faithful to the Spirit in a way we never were before.

How you come together in the future and the frequency with which you do it will be unique to this community of bishops but it is critical in the desert of contemporary society just as the midrash on the Genesis story maintains.

There is something else I want to mention. I am reluctant to do it because while there are similarities between all Christian communities, there are huge differences between a group of 25 celibate religious men and a large body of men and women bishops like this. It is also a very personal chapter in the history of our community. But something else that changed our life together and transformed our ministry within the Church was that we started in a very deliberate way to talk about our prayer with one another. We shared, very tentatively, and again in small groups, images that had come to us in prayer, issues of discernment that we had taken to prayer, how we thought God spoke to us in prayer, and -- maybe this is the most important thing of all that we shared -- how a lot of the time in prayer we didn't do a damn thing and we didn't have a clue if anything was happening in our relationship with God. Sometimes we told one another we hadn't prayed in long time. In some very tangible ways we were giving one another spiritual direction, but on a far deeper level, trust was opened in way it never had been before.

I don't know if it is appropriate for bishops to talk to one another about prayer. I only want to encourage you in what you are doing and let you know that along the way the Spirit will offer you more ways, deeper ways for you to keep on becoming a new community of faith.

Finally I'd like to say what model bedouins you are, true sons and daughter of Abraham and Sarah. For I came here as a stranger and I have felt very welcomed and cared for by you this week in your tent. I have prayed for the House of Bishops for a long time but, having had this experience with you, I think I know better how to pray for you. And I ask you to pray for the renewal of the religious life in our church.